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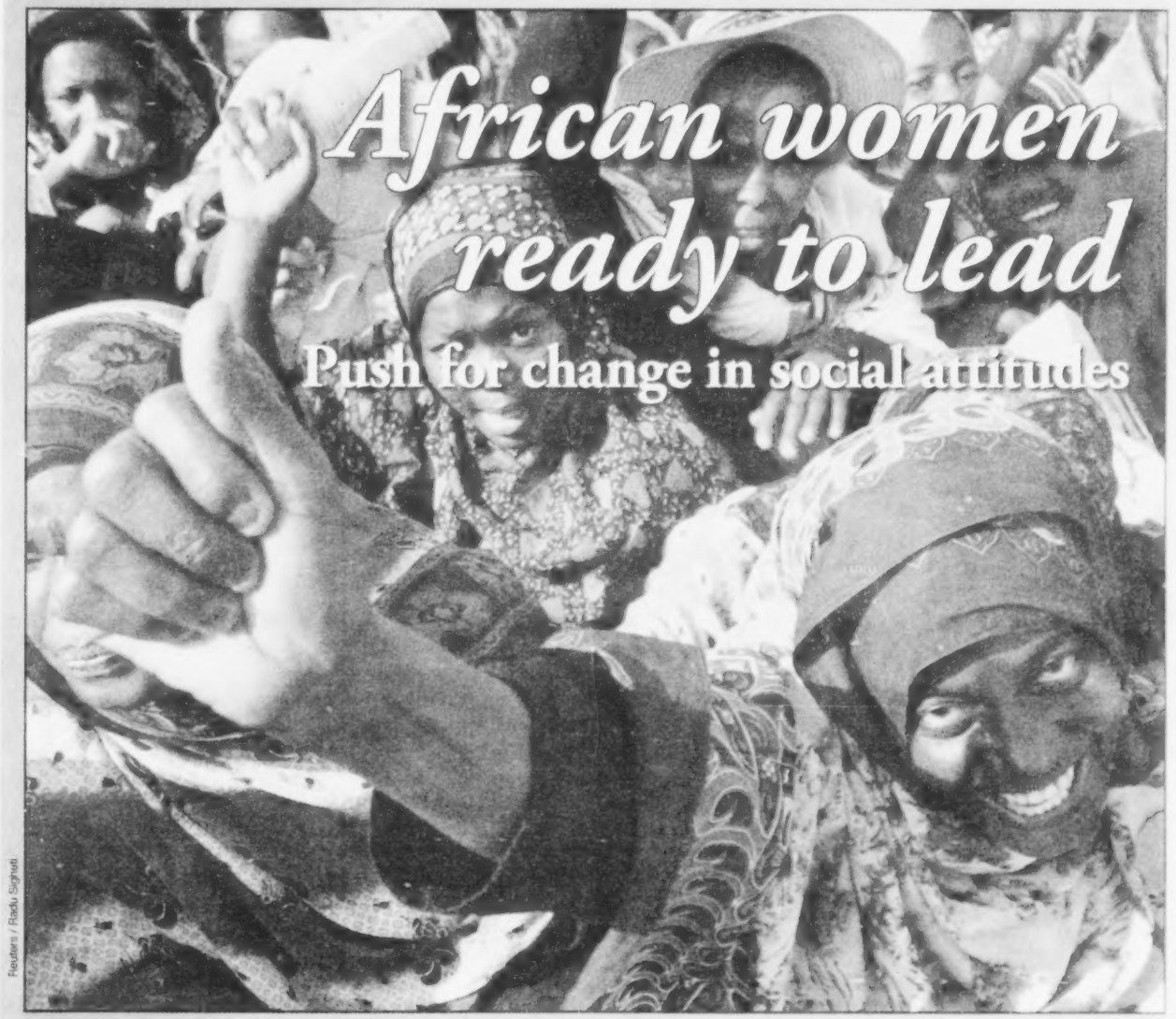

African women ready to lead

Push for change in social attitudes

Reuters / Radu Sigheti

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Combating inequality in Africa

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African AIDS battle at a crossroads

Progress in a few countries, but huge effort remains

By **Ernest Harsch**

A quarter of a century after the first AIDS cases were diagnosed, a handful of countries in Africa and elsewhere are showing that determined efforts to combat the disease can succeed in lowering infection rates. In Kenya and Zimbabwe, and in urban areas in a few other countries, the percentage of people infected with the HIV virus that causes AIDS was below the levels recorded two years earlier.

"The global AIDS response stands at a crossroads," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan reported to a special high-level meeting of the General Assembly on 31 May–2 June. The road to success will entail building on the recent progress, Mr. Annan stated, with "unprecedented" efforts to strengthen national anti-AIDS policies and provide much wider access to treatment and prevention programmes. But failure to pursue such a course would allow the pandemic to spread further, at the cost of many more lives. "Countries whose development is already flagging because of AIDS will continue to weaken, potentially threatening social stability and national security."

African delegates agreed strongly with that assessment. "We need to do much more if we are to reverse and indeed to end this pandemic," Zambian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ronnie Shikapwasha told the meeting. And despite some signs of progress, he reminded the participants, "each life lost due to AIDS marks a milestone defeat in our fight against AIDS."

At the close of the three-day meeting, the delegates vowed a greatly stepped-up battle. They pledged to combine prevention, care and treatment efforts, strengthen national strategies and eliminate gender inequalities, among other steps. The representatives noted UN estimates that funding for AIDS programmes will need to be tripled over the next five years, from $8.3 bn from all sources in 2005 to $20-23 bn by 2010, and committed themselves to ensuring that "new and additional resources" are made available from both donors and affected countries.

'Rage against women's oppression'

The pain and urgency of those living with HIV was conveyed directly to the diplomatic representatives by Ms. Nkhensani Mavasa, deputy chairperson of South Africa's non-governmental Treatment Action Campaign. She was the first HIV-positive person to ever address a plenary session of the General Assembly. Reporting that she herself had suffered rape and arguing that sexual abuse leaves women especially vulnerable to infection, Ms. Mavasa observed that women constitute nearly 60 per cent of the more than 40 million HIV-positive people in the world. This reality, she said, "must make us rage against women's oppression."

In the past, Ms. Mavasa said, political leaders hesitated, debated endlessly and failed to protect the most vulnerable, while the epidemic spread ever wider. Turning specifically to the delegates from her own continent, she added, "I call on African leaders sitting here to protect and promote the human rights of all people and vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls. We ask that you not fail us yet again."

Signs of hope

Just before the meeting, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) issued a comprehensive report on the global AIDS epidemic. It highlighted a decline in new HIV infections in several countries. Based on the most extensive national survey data ever compiled on HIV/AIDS, the report revealed that AIDS prevention programmes are beginning to have an impact. Summarizing the findings, UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot said that "2005 was the least bad year in the history of the AIDS epidemic."

Condom distribution in Nigeria. AIDS prevention programmes are beginning to have an impact.

In Zimbabwe, which is among the countries with the highest infection rates in Africa, the HIV prevalence rate among adults (aged 15–49) fell from 22.1 per cent in 2003 to 20.1 per cent in 2005. The report confirmed earlier indications that education and prevention programmes were contributing to behavioural changes among young Zimbabweans, who are waiting longer to become sexually active, have fewer casual sex partners and are using condoms more frequently (see *Africa Renewal*, January 2006).

Kenya also saw its HIV prevalence rate decline, from 6.8 per cent to 6.1 per cent over the same period. Burkina Faso's national infection rate, already at a relatively low 2.1 per cent in 2003, stayed about the same. But the infection rate among 15-24 year old pregnant women in the capital fell to 1.8 per cent in 2005, compared with 3.3 per cent in 2002. Moreover, reported

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Protecting civilians from genocide

Twelve years after the Rwanda slaughter, many challenges remain

By **Mary Kimani**

When Eugenie Mukeshimana and Suad Mansour met on the eve of the twelfth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, little did they realize how much they had in common. Eugenie survived the 1994 Rwanda genocide but she lost most of her family. Six of Suad's relatives were killed in Darfur, in western Sudan, and the rest are in a refugee camp, in constant fear of more attacks by the murderous Janjaweed militia. Help is yet to arrive. "It is as if the world never learned any lessons from Rwanda," Eugenie says.

UN Photo/Tim McKulka

Residents of a camp for displaced people in southern Darfur appeal for international protection

Eugenie and Suad were among the speakers at a meeting held at UN headquarters to mark 12 years since the April 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Another participant, Mr. Juan Mendez, former president of the International Centre for Transitional Justice and now special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the prevention of genocide, noted that a dozen years after the Rwanda genocide and faced with comparable atrocities in Darfur, the international community is "still having the same debates we had in 1994."

Yet, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pointed out last year, "when it comes to laws ... we are blessed with what amounts to an international bill of human rights, among which are impressive norms to protect the weakest among us, including victims of conflict and persecution."

Among those norms is the Genocide Convention, signed in 1948. It commits all governments to act to prevent and punish acts of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and other crimes against humanity. In September 2005, at the UN World Summit, 150 leaders from across the globe reaffirmed that "responsibility to protect," using all necessary means, including, where appropriate, military force.

Despite such pledges, Suad's family and thousands of others continue to face attacks and forced displacement. In Darfur alone, varying estimates of between 200,000 and 400,000 people have died since 2003, while UN relief agencies place the number of refugees, displaced people and others requiring relief aid at 3.6 million. In northern Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), many more are also suffering and under threat. For such people, says Mr. Annan, "there is no solace in the unimplemented words of the Geneva Conventions, to say nothing of the international community's solemn promises of 'never again'."

Hesitant and tardy

The problem, says the UN Secretary-General, is not a shortage of international laws and treaties. The problem is getting countries to act on their commitments. "We continue to lack the needed political will, as well as a common vision of our responsibility in the face of massive violations of human rights and humanitarian catastrophes occasioned by conflict." Despite massacres of "near genocide proportions" in the DRC, Liberia and elsewhere, "our response to them has been hesitant and tardy."

Mr. Pierre Prosper, a former US ambassador-at-large for war crimes, agrees that it is difficult to get member countries of the UN, particularly in the Security Council, to make and support decisions for a quick and effective intervention. "Quite frankly," he said at the UN meeting, "the Security Council is inherently slow because of all the politics involved in its decision-making."

Mr. Prosper argued that since "different political agendas" often make the Security Council slow to act, citizens threatened with violence should be able to turn to regional organizations like the African Union to protect them. "Logistically, it is quicker for a neighbour to respond to help protect lives. It is far quicker for a regional organization to respond."

'Set up for failure'

One such regional initiative is the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS). In 2004 the African Union, European Union and the UN negotiated with the government of Sudan to permit the placement of African troops in Darfur. The presence of

7,100 AU troops and observers has led to a reduction of violence, but their numbers are inadequate to police Darfur, an area as large as France.

In May 2006, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland argued that AMIS needs more trained soldiers, helicopters, trucks and communications facilities, as well as more reliable international funding.

Mr. Mendez notes that international financing for the AU mission falls $200 mn short of what it requested. The mission therefore never "had the capacity to do the job, it never had the support," he commented. "The Security Council and, I would say, the international community, has almost set up the African Union for failure." Under such circumstances, he added, it is unrealistic to expect a regional organization to solve the problem.

While the AU force may be weak, Mr. Egeland points out, its presence does have some impact. That is important while a consensus is being built for a stronger UN peacekeeping mission to take over. Establishing such a mission may take some time. First, the Sudanese government and the Security Council will need to reach agreement. Major contributors will then have to provide sufficient funding and military personnel. Mr. Egeland notes that "we are overstretched now, in terms of peacekeeping obligations, all over the world. So it might be hard to get enough soldiers." Realistically, he estimated, it may take nine months to get a UN force on the ground.

In the meantime, political pressure is needed to ensure more resources for AMIS. "Strengthening the African Union force could happen tomorrow," Mr. Egeland argues. "It is a question of enough parliamentarians and congressmen and -women in enough countries just saying, 'We are going to give adequate resources,' and getting enough African states to say, 'We will send more high-quality soldiers and police to Darfur.' That should have happened yesterday and could happen tomorrow."

With consent or without

As in Rwanda, Darfur and the DRC, massive crimes against humanity frequently take place as part of ongoing conflicts or wars. And measures to halt genocide and other abuses often require intervention by other countries to end the killings or bring relief aid to suffering populations.

Ideally, the easiest and most effective interventions occur when the combatants themselves agree to participate in a peace process. "There is a real correlation between the agreement or the consent of the parties and the potential for early, meaningful success of the missions," says Ms. Jane Holl Lute, the UN's assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping missions.

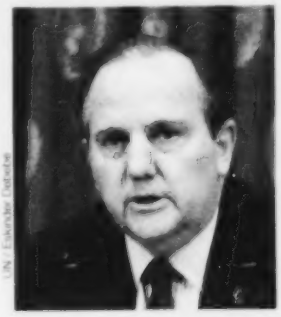
Such consent makes it possible for external actors to engage in a whole range of activities, including negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlements. Also, if warring parties fully accept the terms of a peace agreement, they are more likely to ensure that their combatants do not harm civilians, to comply with demobilization and disarmament provisions, to allow the distribution of relief aid and to permit displaced populations to return to their homes.

However, when consent is not given and mass killings continue, that can create a political challenge for the international community. In Sudan, for example, the government is not fully cooperating with the African Union mission and has not yet agreed to the deployment of a UN force to replace it.

Lack of consent from rebel or militia groups also poses challenges. In Darfur, neither the pro-government Janjaweed militia nor two of the three rebel groups have taken part in the peace talks; they continue to attack civilians and have obstructed the work of humanitarian relief agencies. In the eastern DRC, some rebel groups regularly attack villagers and then withdraw back into the jungle.

Under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, the Security Council has the authority to approve the use of sanctions or military action to stop genocide or mass killings, without the consent of the governments or other military forces involved in such atrocities. However, for varying political or economic reasons, some UN member states may oppose either sanctions or force. Any of the five permanent members of the Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK or the US – can veto a decision to intervene.

"Until we get to the stage where vetoes are not applied," says Mr. Colin Keating, New Zealand's former ambassador to the UN and president of the Security Council during the Rwanda genocide, "we will never be able to say that we can respond effectively to such crises."



UN / Eskinder Debebe

"We need to talk about early warning and early action in ways that can help prevent genocide without waiting until the last minute."

—Juan Mendez, UN special adviser on the prevention of genocide

Even if the Security Council can agree on intervention, it would still be important to "exhaust every possibility of a negotiated solution," Mr. Keating told *Africa Renewal*, since forceful military intervention could have "much more serious consequences." Other options may include diplomatic efforts or even targeted sanctions to pressure a government to agree to serious peace talks or to accept some form of intervention.

Similarly, Mr. Mendez argues that it would be a mistake, as some suggest, to completely isolate or shun a recalcitrant government. It is "not realistic to disengage completely," he says. "It is not only unrealistic, but it won't help to find solutions either. The problem is not whether to engage, but how to engage. In the case of the regime in Khartoum, the international community has not told that government forcefully enough that its conduct in Darfur is unacceptable, that it cannot go on doing this."

Positive changes

Despite the difficulties, positive changes have taken place. A number of measures

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African women are ready to lead

But social beliefs and attitudes hinder their quest

By **Gumisai Mutume**

When the young Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika was sent off to an all-girls boarding school in Zambia renowned for its academic excellence and sporting discipline, she had no idea she was laying the foundation for a career in leadership. She had plenty of time to concentrate on her studies, unlike many other girls her age who had to divide time between school and household responsibilities. Today she represents her country as ambassador to the US, has served in parliament, and in 2001 became the first woman to run for president in Zambia.

Celebrating International Women's Day in Côte d'Ivoire

It was as if her environment conspired to get her to where she is, she says. She grew up with parents who supported her dreams and who were always available. "We spent a lot of time with our parents," says Ms. Lewanika, who was in New York in February to attend the 50th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). "My parents created an enabling environment, and sent all of us [both boys and girls] to school."

Among her achievements has been taking part in the women's lobby that pushed the continental political organization, the African Union, to adopt groundbreaking rules in 2004 requiring a 50–50 gender balance among officers in its highest ranks. Ms. Lewanika also lobbied for the adoption in 2000 of UN Resolution 1325, which promotes equal participation by women in conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping and peace building.

But she represents the exception rather than the rule. In Africa, only three countries (Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa) have attained the goal of having at least 30 per cent of the seats in national parliaments filled by women, in line with the UN target of 30 per cent for women in decision-making bodies. Globally, only 12 other countries had reached that level in national parliaments by 2004.

Multiple roles

Getting into and staying in positions of power is difficult because of the roles traditionally expected of women, Ms. Lewanika told *Africa Renewal*. If one wants to be a parliamentarian as well as a wife and a mother, and the husband does not support her, then it is hard to continue. "When you have young children, you have to rush home while your male counterparts carry on with discussions in the bars or in the chambers" of parliament, she said.

All across the world, women in leadership positions are hampered by numerous obstacles, including pervasive and often subtle attitudes and beliefs that women are unequal to men at home, at work and in government. Feminists argue that regardless of race, class or ethnicity, women are consistently defined as political outsiders whose participation in public life is conditional upon their maternal roles.

Many cultures view the raising of children as primarily the job of women, with men not expected to have domestic roles. In countries where such beliefs are deep-seated, women who go against the grain are often required to perform double duty. Professional women, for instance, are obliged to manage the household and family while also performing their professional tasks. This often leaves women at a disadvantage in relation to their male colleagues.

Activists also note that because women are often viewed as out of place in professional environments, they are subjected to more scrutiny at work than are men of the same rank, which slows down women's advancement into management positions.

"I was always, always being watched by my colleagues, at all levels," says former Mexican Ambassador to the UN Rosario Green. "Men who were above me watched me to see if I would make a mistake. Men who were at the same level would watch me to see if I could do things as well as they did. And of course my bosses, who were men, were always scrutinizing me and other women, because they were fearful of history's judgment: 'You made a mistake. You selected a woman!'"

To gain positions of authority, women frequently have to be overqualified just to be noticed, says Ms. Lewanika. That, she says, is a direct reflection of how societies view women — as not as good as men. And when women do get appointed, "you hear people say, 'She is just like a man.' In other words they relate to you as a man if you are an achiever."

Women ambassadors

In the US capital, Washington, DC, Ms. Lewanika is among only a handful of women ambassadors. Out of 16 female ambassadors to the US, eight are African and, she adds, it is not a coincidence that seven of them are from Southern Africa. In 1997 the member-states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) adopted a declaration on gender and development that required each country to reach at least 30 per cent female representation in decision-making by 2005. Although only three countries have achieved the SADC target, on average women comprise 20 per cent of the region's legislators, second only to Scandinavian countries, where the average is 38 per cent, notes Gender Links, a Southern African non-governmental group.

Since the First World Conference on Women in 1975, the women's movement has taken significant strides towards achieving full participation of women in all areas of society. In February 2006, gender activists and policymakers convened in New York on the 50th anniversary of the UN's CSW to take stock of progress. Established in 1946 by the Economic and Social Council (one of the five organs of the UN), the commission has the task of advancing women's interests.

When the CSW was first established, women could vote in only 30 of the original 51 UN member states. Now, across the globe, women have secured the right to vote and, in most countries, to stand for election. The frontlines of the battle have now shifted. Gender activists are focusing increasingly on raising the levels of women's representation in political and economic decision-making posts and helping women to become more effective.

Turning point

"Progress has been slow and uneven," says CSW Vice-Chairperson Adekunbi Abibat Sonaike, from Nigeria, noting that many African countries have not yet reached the international UN target of 30 per cent female representation in positions of power. She argues that poverty is one of the main obstacles for women on the continent. Africa continues to "lag behind other regions in terms of poverty alleviation, and those most affected by poverty are women."

The UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) concurs, observing that women in poor countries are often held back from politics because, for starters, campaigning requires money. In Africa, many women lack adequate access to productive resources, such as land, water, energy, credit, means of communication, education and training, health and work with decent pay. The number of people living in extreme poverty (on less than one US dollar a day) increased from 217 million in 1990 to 290 million in 2000, notes the ECA, and the majority of them were women and girls.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in 1994 was a critical turning point in the struggle for gender equality. For the first time, governments adopted an international agreement committing them to concrete actions towards advancing women into positions of power. In Beijing, governments agreed that in order to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development, "women and men must participate fully and equally in the formulation of macro-economic and social policies and strategies for the eradication of poverty." They set an international benchmark for women's participation — 30 per cent of posts in decision-making positions. It is thought that this percentage will give women "critical mass" — the minimum level of representation required for women to make a difference in policy-making.

In Beijing, governments also agreed to review "the impact of electoral systems on the political representation of women" and to propose reforms to improve rep-

Women in international agencies

Gender activists are increasingly setting their sights on getting more women into high office in international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Out of all policymaking areas, women are least represented in economics and finance, notes the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), an international women's lobby group.

Around the world there are only 28 female ministers in charge of economic portfolios. The consequence, WEDO reports, is that women's interests, experiences and concerns are either absent or inadequately reflected in economic decision-making. Over the last few decades, the World Bank and IMF have been designing economic reform programmes in poor countries. The absence of women in the formulation of those policies has meant "that the majority of the monetary, financial and trade policies being implemented worldwide ... are gender blind, resulting in serious economic costs to society as a whole," reports WEDO.

At the Bank and IMF, female representation among leadership staff is around 20 per cent, and fewer than 10 per cent of the members of the organizations' boards of governors are women. While those institutions have the authority to alter the gender composition of their staffs, they have little control over the boards. Governors are appointed by individual member countries.

A woman has never occupied the top post at either the Bank or the IMF. The IMF currently has its first woman deputy managing director, Ms. Anne Krueger.

One of the outcomes of this year's meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), says Ms. Doris Mpomou of WEDO, "is that activists have managed to push for the inclusion of the international financial institutions and academia in the 30 per cent quota target."

The African Women's Caucus at CSW has charged that even the UN is still lagging behind. In its 60 years of existence, "no woman has ever been Secretary-General of the UN," they noted in a statement, urging the UN to promote the rise of women to the top post, especially at a time when the organization is undertaking reforms.

A report on women in global leadership by the International Centre for Research in Women, a Washington-based non-profit group, recommends that international agencies such as the UN publish gender-disaggregated statistics on progress in advancing women up the organizational ladder. The institutions should also set timetables and concrete plans to promote gender equality at the highest levels.

resentation. Gender monitors report that those countries that enacted such electoral changes have made the most progress. All 15 countries that had at least 30 per cent women in their national parliaments by 2004 had also adopted electoral measures specifically to empower women.

Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is Africa's first elected female head of state.

Those measures included taking affirmative action by adopting female quotas in political parties and national parliaments. Many countries showing progress have also used proportional representation in their electoral systems. Under such a formula, a political party wins seats according to the proportion of its overall vote, as opposed to systems where the winning party takes all seats. Because this system makes it easier for smaller parties to win seats, they are often more likely to "risk" fielding female candidates. In addition, some of these countries have also enacted laws that grant subsidies to women to help them run for election.

In Africa, Mozambique and South Africa use voluntary party quotas, to guarantee that a certain percentage of women are selected as political candidates. Rwanda uses legal quotas, under which the targets apply to all political parties.

Breaking into leadership

Despite the challenges, a growing proportion of women are breaking through the glass ceiling. Women who have entered into leadership positions attribute their success to factors such as access to education and work opportunities, good mentoring by both men and women, support from family, employers, supervisors, teachers and colleagues, and successful lobbying by gender activists.

The world average for women in parliament rose from 11.7 per cent in 1995 to 15.6 per cent by 2004. In Southern Africa, where the proportion of women in parliament, at 17.9 per cent, is much higher than the African average of 11 per cent, three countries selected female deputy speakers during the last decade. In addition, Mozambique appointed a woman prime minister and Zimbabwe and South Africa named women deputy presidents.

In January, Liberians swore in Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as Africa's first elected female leader. Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, a former World Bank economist and UN official, was seen to have been elected on the basis of her perceived ability to do the job better than her male competitors.

But the advancement of women into positions of power does not, by itself, resolve the need to create an environment that allows them to make a real difference, notes Ms. Pamila Mncayi, director of the Gender Advocacy Programme, a South African lobby group. "It is a reality that traditionally women have always been given positions as deputies to men, without any real power or significance." Regarding South Africa's first female deputy president, Phumzile Gloria Mlambo-Ngcuka, Ms. Mncayi adds: "The question remains — does she have the power to improve women's lives in South Africa?"

According to Ms. Mncayi, it is time for countries such as South Africa to start thinking beyond numbers and to campaign for the reform of government institutions to allow women to participate effectively. Government institutions, she says, should be "gender sensitive" in the way they operate, by taking into consideration sex and gender roles. Parliaments, for example, should be reformed to allow mothers and fathers to share the responsibilities of parenthood so that both may attend sessions.

Because historically women have had fewer opportunities and exposure to leadership positions than men do, women often feel intimidated by the political system and are hesitant to participate, says Ms. Mncayi. Deliberate programmes to train and equip women when they enter the corridors of power are therefore needed.

Enhancing participation

Some of Africa's women politicians also have to deal with political systems that promote patronage. Under such systems, politicians are beholden to the party hierarchy rather than to their constituents, which renders elected officials less effective in policymaking.

Shireen Hassim and Sheila Meintjes, in a paper commissioned by the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, note that proportional representation, an electoral system widely assumed to be more favourable to women, carries costs that are not often cited, allowing "political parties to establish mechanisms of control over women."

Studies in Uganda, one of the first countries in Africa to adopt quotas for women, show that the effects of women's participation have been mixed and that allegiances to the ruling party often hinder women parliamentarians from supporting legislation favoured by women's movements. Similar concerns have been expressed in Mozambique and South Africa, note Ms. Hassim and Ms. Meintjes. The question facing women members of parliament is how to balance their commitment to the party with what many of them see as their commitment to policies that push the interests of women.

In Mozambique and South Africa women are represented in record numbers in parliament, due to affirmative action policies. However, like their male counterparts, they are elected to represent the party and not necessarily to represent the interests of women. "The challenge is therefore

whether and how women's gender interests can be articulated in a way that is distinct from their party interests and identities," Ms. Hassim and Ms. Meintjes write.

In neighbouring Zimbabwe, write Ms. Catherine Makoni and Ms. Tsitsi Matekaire, the women's lobby was at a loss about whether or not to celebrate the appointment last year of the country's first woman deputy president, Joyce Mujuru. Her appointment was seen in some quarters "as one of the games that political parties play," they note in a study for the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), an international women's lobby group. "It was viewed as expedient ... [to appoint a woman] at that point in our history."

In addition, they note, she was named to a government that has enacted laws that are increasingly viewed as intolerant of dissent. Hundreds of women who have demonstrated against deteriorating living conditions in the Southern African nation have been arrested.

Liberian voters. Many Africans are finding that getting women into high office is only the first step.

Post-conflict countries do well

Although armed conflict has been very disruptive in Africa, says Ms. Doris Mpomou a New York-based researcher for WEDO, it is also paradoxically "opening up opportunities for women to change gender relations and to enter positions of leadership."

Over the last decade, more than a third of armed conflicts worldwide were in Africa, producing more than 6 million refugees and 20 million internally displaced people. The wars have destroyed infrastructure, stalled development and exposed women in particular to rape and abuse.

But conflict has created occasions for women to transform their lives and redefine their gender roles. Conflict often results in significant demographic changes, as men go to war and are killed in combat. While this does not automatically alter the balance of political and social power between men and women, it can provide some opportunities for women when they greatly outnumber men. In Rwanda, after the 1994 genocide, there were four men for every six women. Women stepped into roles in areas traditionally dominated by men, such as politics, agriculture and the formal economy. Rwanda holds the current record for the highest level of female representation in national parliament.

While Rwanda is an extreme case, other African countries in conflict have seen major migration into the cities, away from fighting in rural areas. Such mass migrations have pushed women to become heads of households and to take on other traditional male roles.

In some conflicts, such as the Eritrean war for independence from Ethiopia and the liberation wars in South Africa and Zimbabwe, women fought alongside men, asserting their equality and winning some bargaining power in post-conflict settlements. Once the wars ended, women felt empowered to claim positions of power in government, as in South Africa.

Over time, Zimbabwean women suffered an erosion of the initial gains they won following the end of armed conflict. However, they subsequently undertook a renewed drive for equal participation in leadership through the impetus provided by the Beijing conference. Zimbabwe's example shows that women's movements need not rely only on domestic support, but can also gain leverage through help from the international community.

The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has been very active in promoting women's participation in peace processes and in training women for leadership in many African countries, including Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Independent organizations such as the London-based International Alert, established in 1985, have also played important roles. The group works with women's networks and has facilitated the participation of women in the peace processes in Liberia and the DRC. Activists say that deeper research is needed into how the gains women have made in war and transitional situations are often pushed back during peacetime, to help figure out how such gains can be secured.

Finally, activists are also working towards the day when politicians of both sexes push for policies that empower men and women. At the end of the day, positions of leadership need to be filled by "both men and women who are gender sensitive," says Ms. Lewanika. "We are striving for a positive partnership between men and women." ■

Boosting African farm yields

More fertilizer, irrigation and other inputs are vital, says NEPAD

By **Michael Fleshman**

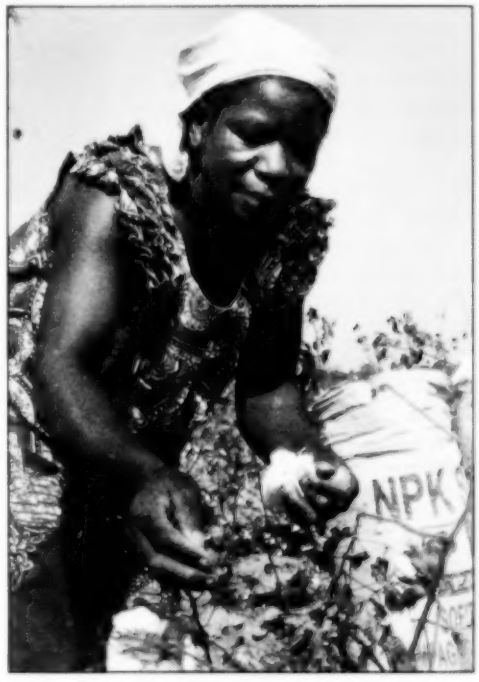
Emily Miyanda is luckier than most farmers in hunger-plagued Zambia. With 6 hectares of irrigated land only a dozen kilometres from the capital, Ms. Miyanda produces maize and vegetables for the big Lusaka market. She hires her neighbours to help with planting and harvesting. But even with those advantages, she is squeezed between the high costs of what she needs to buy and the low prices her produce fetches at market. "We'd like some government support in buying seeds and fertilizer," Ms. Miyanda told the BBC earlier this year. "That would make life easier."

For tens of millions of people in rural Africa, life is getting harder. Reliant on erratic rains, working exhausted soil and hobbled by decades of underinvestment and neglect by national governments and international donors, many have sunk deeper into poverty as African agriculture — the mainstay of the region's economy — continues to face neglect. A growing number of African governments and UN and non-governmental agencies argue that unless urgent efforts are made to raise crop yields, build transportation and marketing systems and adopt modern, sustainable farming methods, the continent will fail to reach its development goals and the rural majority will reap only meagre harvests.

Development blueprint

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of agriculture to Africa's economic prospects. More than 65 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's estimated 750 million people are engaged in agriculture, and the sector generates more than a quarter of gross domestic product in most countries. Farm produce accounts for about 20 per cent of Africa's international trade and is a major source of raw materials for industry.

In recognition of its importance, proponents of the continental development plan, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, released NEPAD's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) in 2003 (see *Africa Recovery*, January 2004). Its goals are ambitious — to reach rural growth rates of 6 per cent annually by 2015, integrate and invigorate regional and national agricultural markets, significantly increase agricultural exports, transform Africa into a "strategic player" in global agricultural science and technology, practice sound environmental and land management techniques, and reduce rural poverty. The plan identifies four key areas, or pillars, of an investment plan for revitalizing the rural economy, including:



Cotton farmer in Burkina Faso with NPK fertilizer. Africa's nutrient-depleted soils need replenishment.

- expanding the acreage of irrigated African farmland and improving land management and farming techniques to preserve and improve soil quality
- investing in rural infrastructure, including roads and railways, storage and processing facilities, markets, communications systems and reliable supply networks for farmers
- making food production a high priority, both to combat hunger and for export, and improving emergency responses to natural disasters and conflicts
- strengthening African agricultural research and development, including in advanced technologies and farming methods, and disseminating advances quickly and efficiently to farmers, suppliers and buyers.

The CAADP plan emphasizes coordinated regional action in each of the continent's diverse climate zones and relies on existing regional economic organizations and national governments for implementation. The total cost of the programme from 2002 through 2015 is estimated at $251 bn — about $18 bn a year. Although the blueprint envisages donor financing for a portion of the total, analysts note that Africa's agricultural imports currently average about $19 bn annually — suggesting that a significant portion of the costs can eventually be covered by African countries as they cut their spending on imports.

'Mined of life'

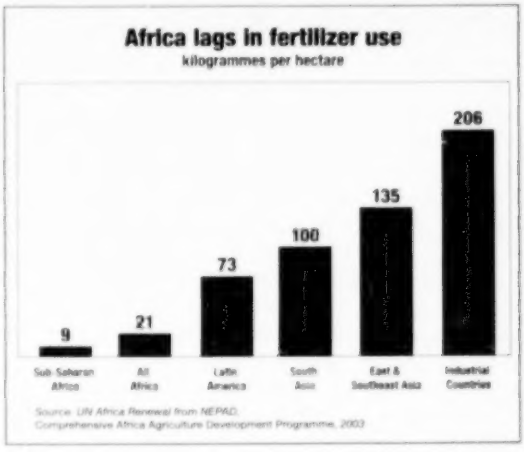
However, the challenges to success are as large as the potential consequences of failure. The UN's World Food Programme estimates that more than 30 million Africans are currently in need of international food aid. Researchers for the African Union reported in January that annual population growth has outstripped food production on the continent since 1993, resulting in a 20 per cent rise in the number of hungry people — from 176 million to 210 million. Commercial exports have fared no better, with Africa's share of world trade

declining for nine of its 10 largest export crops.

One important obstacle to increased productivity has been the steady deterioration of Africa's soils, noted Mr. Amit Roy, the head of the International Fertilizer Development Centre (IFDC), a US-based institute that promotes agricultural advancement in developing countries. "Today three-quarters of Africa's farmlands — some 170 mn hectares [420 mn acres] is degraded," he told reporters in New York in late March. "As a result, grain yield has stagnated at 1 tonne per hectare, compared to the world average of about 3 tonnes." Crops consume upwards of 45 kilogrammes of nutrients and minerals from each hectare of land every season, he noted, a process known as nutrient mining. "When farmers plant the same fields season after season and cannot afford to replace the soil nutrients taken up by their crops, the soil is literally mined of life."

An estimated 8 mn tonnes of nutrients are depleted annually. Replenishing the nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus and other minerals absorbed by plants is therefore vital to keep crop yields from declining. Part of the answer lies in better farming methods, including expanding the range of crops grown, improving soil conservation practices and utilizing improved seeds and technology. But the key to launching a "revolution" in African agriculture, Mr. Roy told *Africa Renewal*, is much greater use of fertilizer.

In Asia and Latin America, farmers have dramatically improved harvests by improving the productivity of existing land, whereas in Africa, farmers have sought greater output by cultivating more land. "Traditionally, African farmers use the slash-and-burn method," he said. "They burn off a section of land and farm it for a season or two, then clear another plot and leave the old field fallow." But population increases and growing land shortages have forced farmers to cultivate the same fields repeatedly, stripping the land of nutrients and resulting in smaller harvests and less income. Such pressures have also led farmers to clear land poorly suited for cultivation, which contributes to soil erosion and yields only marginal increases in harvests.



An estimated 50,000 hectares of Africa's forests and 60,000 hectares of savannah are lost to such methods annually — resulting in severe environmental degradation and contributing to a 20-year decline in agricultural production per capita.

According to the CAADP, African farmers currently use far less fertilizer than their counterparts in other regions of the world (see graph above). "A strong relationship exists between the level of fertilizer use and cereal yield," notes the programme.

In a study prepared for the 9-13 June Africa Fertilizer Summit, called by the African Union to focus attention on the African soils crisis, IFDC researchers Julio Henao and Carlos Baanante noted that fertilizer use in Africa is less than a tenth the world average of 100 kilogrammes. Nearly two-thirds of Africa's fertilizer is consumed in just five countries, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, primarily in the commercial and export sectors. "Negligible fertilizer use by smallholder farmers," they asserted, "is a major factor in the region's declining farm yield per person which has exacerbated hunger and undernutrition."

High costs, short supply

Heavy reliance on imported fertilizers, combined with high transportation costs and the absence of suppliers in the countryside, has meant that African farmers pay between two and six times the average world price for fertilizer — when they can find it at all. The IFDC study estimated that it costs more to move a kilogramme of fertilizer from an African port to a farm 100 kilometres inland than it costs to move it from a factory in the US to the port. With millions of African family farmers surviving on less than a dollar a day, imported fertilizer is simply unaffordable.

Yet evidence suggests that even modest increases in the use of fertilizer — whether nitrogen, phosphorous or potassium — can have dramatic results. In Ethiopia, one study found that just one bottle cap's worth of chemical fertilizer on each plant increased millet yields exponentially. The technique, known as "micro-dosing," is regarded as particularly appropriate for Africa's small-scale farmers, because it reduces costs and avoids damage to fragile soils from excessive chemical use.

Citing the potential environmental risks to African soils and water sources from too much chemical fertilizer being applied to farms — as sometimes happened during Asia's "green revolution" — proponents of sustainable agriculture in Africa argue that farmers should use more animal manure, compost and other organic fertilizers. If farmers better integrate stock-raising with crop cultivation, cattle and other livestock could provide them with not only more manure but also with animal traction for ploughing fields and hauling crops after they are harvested.

While organic fertilizers are important, agrees Mr. Roy, he points to a serious limitation. "The quality of animal manure is dependent on the quality of the food the animals are fed." With much soil severely depleted, he says, "the fodder contains little of the nutrients needed by crops." Organic fertilizers alone "are simply not the answer to the crisis of Africa's soil fertility. We need to increase the use of both organic and chemical fertilizers."

The CAADP makes the same point. Under the new, integrated approach to African agriculture advocated by NEPAD, "mineral fertilizers and organic matter are treated as complements rather than substitutes."

One way to make chemical fertilizers

more available and affordable is to increase local production. This can reduce costs, ease the pressure on foreign currency reserves and shorten the supply chain to farmers. Although Africa consumes only about 1 per cent of global fertilizer production and currently produces even less, prospects for the commercial manufacture of fertilizers are good. Nitrogen is among the most common elements on earth, but converting it into use for plants is energy-intensive. West Africa's vast and largely untapped natural gas resources, notes Mr. Roy, therefore make the region ideally suited for the manufacture of nitrogen fertilizer. Africa also has ample deposits of phosphorus and already exports the mineral to Chinese and Indian farmers. If these minerals can be utilized in local production, Africa would need to import only potassium fertilizer.

But investment in fertilizer production will only come in response to increased demand from farmers, Mr. Roy asserts. Persuading Africa's family farmers that purchasing fertilizer is worth the money and effort will require significant improvements in rural transport networks and infrastructure, an expanded network of rural farm suppliers and markets, and greater financial returns, including protection from price fluctuations and subsidized Northern competitors.

Fertilizer no 'silver bullet'

"Fertilizer is not a silver bullet for Africa's agricultural problems," Mr. Roy admits. "The fertilizer doesn't help if it arrives too late, or the crops aren't watered or you can't sell the harvest. Farmers know this. That is why CAADP is so important. It addresses the needs of farmers comprehensively."

In the face of erratic and unreliable rainfall in large swaths of East and Southern Africa, expanding the acreage of irrigated land is also urgent. In February, UN Food and Agriculture Organization Director-General Jacques Diouf told African agriculture ministers gathered in Bamako that just 4 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's arable land is irrigated, compared with 38 per cent in Asia. Although much of Africa has abundant water supplies, he noted, "the region uses less than 3 per cent of its water resources, the lowest percentage of the developing world." NEPAD researchers have estimated the initial investment of irrigating 20 mn more hectares of African farmland at $37 bn, with an additional $31 bn in operating costs through 2015.

"Africa needs to do a better job in applying science and technology to agricultural problems, and getting those advances to the farmer more quickly."

– Amit Roy, International Fertilizer Development Centre

In the absence of such resources, some innovative local initiatives show promise. In Dowa, Malawi, Glyvyns Chinkhuntha has built a gravity-powered irrigation system for his 20-hectare farm using only hoes and shovels. Drawing on water from a nearby river, he has created a system of irrigation canals only as wide as a hoe blade. By blocking or unblocking individual channels with dirt, he is able to direct water where it is needed. This proves, Mr. Chinkhuntha told the US newspaper the *Christian Science Monitor*, that homegrown solutions to Africa's agricultural problems do exist. "Africa would have plenty to eat," he said, if farmers could gain more education and training. "All the knowledge and information is tucked up in offices," he lamented, instead of at work in the fields.

Rebuilding rural supply networks and marketing systems so farmers have the means and incentives to produce more is another major challenge. Government-run agriculture marketing boards used to perform some of these functions, providing stable prices, credit extension services, improved seeds and technology to local farmers. But as South African researchers Raj Patel and Alexa Delwiche have noted, most boards were liquidated in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of privatization policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. "Now, in addition to enduring direct exposure to international market fluctuations, farmers are often unsure when private buyers will appear, and are thus forced to sell cheap to the first trader," they wrote in a 2002 study for the US non-governmental organization Food First. The difficulties of transportation and shipping also mean that outlying areas often are not covered by private buyers, a problem faced by suppliers of fertilizers, seeds and other farm inputs as well.

Mr. Roy says that expanding private sector involvement in rural marketing and supply activities is a long-term solution. But he acknowledges that high poverty rates in the countryside and the need for "public goods" like roads and markets give African governments a key role in creating incentives for private investment.

In 1998, a pilot programme launched by the government and donor agencies in Malawi distributed small "starter packs" of fertilizer and improved seeds to virtually every rural household. Although the project was successful, its high cost and lack of sustainability limited its adoption on a larger scale. In Kenya, Mr. Roy says, the government chose to enable the private sector through greater investment in infrastructure, while other governments have used a combination of subsidies and private sector incentives to try to meet farmers' needs.

Finally, Mr. Roy observes, "Africa needs to do a better job in applying science and technology to agricultural problems, and getting those advances to the farmer more quickly." Here too there are encouraging signs. In 1997, scientists at the West Africa Rice Development Association developed hardy new varieties that combine the best of African and Asian types to sharply improve yields (see *Africa Renewal*, January 2004). NEPAD and the Nigerian-based International Institute for Tropical Agriculture are working to promote and improve another West and Central African staple, cassava, through the pan-African cassava initiative (see page 13).

Expanded and more effective extension services can also bring big dividends by improving land- and water-management techniques, introducing new techniques (such as rotating crops and mixing different crops on the same farm) and bringing scientific expertise and new technologies to farmers quickly.

"The African farmer is primarily a woman farmer," Mr. Roy concludes. "And she is a good farmer who can feed her family and her continent if she is given the tools and the opportunities to do so." ■

Is cassava Africa's new staple food?

NEPAD promotes cassava farming to reduce hunger

By **Itai Madamombe**

It had not rained for months in Southern Africa four years ago and the fields of maize outside of Lusaka, Zambia, stood wilted and gray, a total loss. But despite one of the most severe droughts on record, Melania Chipungu's cassava fields remained vibrant green, swaying in the breeze.

"I used to grow maize, but it was difficult and I would lose my crop whenever the rain was poor. But I don't worry about the drought since I turned to cassava," Mrs. Chipungu told *Africa Renewal*. "Cassava is easier to grow. All I do is keep the weeds out — no fertilizers, no long hours of hard work. I have more time to meet with other women and do things that I enjoy."

Cassava's tuber roots, which look similar to a sweet potato, are rich in carbohydrates. The leaves provide about the same amount of protein as an egg. The crop can be turned into high-quality starch, flour and animal feed. It is also used to make paper and gum. Impressed by cassava's many advantages, Mrs. Chipungu and about twenty other female farmers formed the Mitengo Women's Association to help each other grow the crop. Experts from the Zambian Ministry of Agriculture trained them in how to best grow the plant, said Mrs. Chipungu, who is chair of the association.

No longer ignored

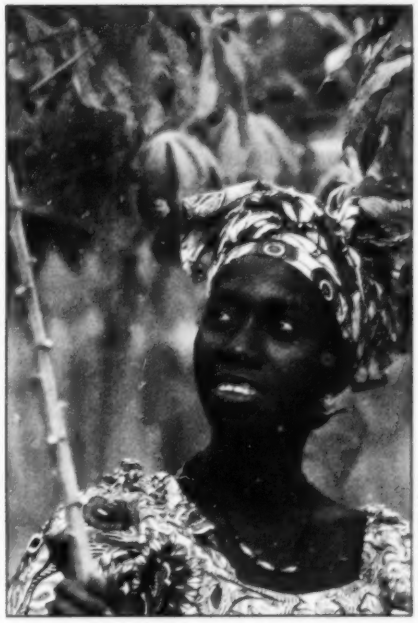
"Many African farmers have ignored cassava in favour of maize. But cassava is now increasingly finding its way into the diets of many Africans," says Richard Mkandawire, who heads the agriculture programme of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). He notes that in the face of chronic food shortages, governments are increasingly turning to food crops like cassava that are cheaper, hardier and easier to grow.

NEPAD, an African-owned vision and strategic framework adopted by African leaders in 2001 to revive development throughout the continent, is promoting the shift to cassava. Recognizing that small farmers are the key to feeding poor families, NEPAD is encouraging farmers to grow cassava as part of an overall strategy to ensure a reliable supply of food.

Although cassava is not quite as nutritionally rich as maize, it grows well in poor soils and with low rainfall, Steve Haggblade, a US Michigan State University scientist told *Africa Renewal*.

"Cassava is the only food staple that farmers can harvest early in the rainy season, when hunger is most acute. Maize stocks usually run out at the end of the year before the new crop is ready for harvest," the Zambia-based Dr. Haggblade says.

Cassava is the crop of choice, he says, because "in a normal year, a farmer gets about only 2 tonnes of maize per hectare. Cassava will yield three times as much food."



A Gambian farmer with a cassava plant: The crop is attracting greater attention across Africa.

Photo: IRIN/Abdoulie Sisay

Improving quality

In a bid to increase the number of cassava growers, African leaders are working with scientists to provide farmers with high-quality seeds and information on the best methods for planting and growing cassava. NEPAD officials are now working with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) to improve cassava so it can yield more, mature faster and resist diseases better. The institute, based in Ibadan, Nigeria, says it has developed a variety that can be harvested within 12 to 24 months and provide yields of more than 40 tonnes per hectare.

Mrs. Chipungu has noticed the difference. "My life improved after I began growing cassava. The new improved varieties, Tanganyika and Mwelu, mature within a year. They also give us big healthy tubers that fight disease better than the old plants," she said.

A sound crop is just the beginning. One of NEPAD's major goals is to help farmers grow enough that they can sell cassava as well as feed their families. Nigeria, the world's leading cassava producer according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), is encouraging its farmers to grow cassava. The Nigerian government estimates that cassava could earn up to $5 bn, about one-third of the income it receives from the sale of crude oil.

'I have money in my pocket'

From their 20-30 acre plots, the women of the Mitengo association hope to export cassava to neighbouring countries. To do this, they will need assistance to buy processing and packaging machines to produce quality goods that can compete on an international market. Many of the women are responsible for supporting themselves.

"We are saying to women, it doesn't matter if you are alone or married, you have to use your hands to survive. My husband is dead and I have eight children, so I can't give up," Mrs. Chipungu said. "Since I turned to cassava, I have money in my

see page 21

Harnessing the Internet for development

African countries seek to widen access, produce content

By **Gumisai Mutume**

While Africa's post-independence leaders dreamed of linking their countries through road and railway networks, today's leaders are on the cusp of making their own dream come true — connecting African countries with each other and the rest of the world through a high-speed telecommunications cable. Originating in Durban, South Africa, a broadband telecommunications cable will stretch underwater for 9,900 kilometres through the Indian Ocean to its final destination, Port Sudan. The East Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy) will, among other functions, support broadband Internet connections that transmit information at up to 40 times the speed of dial-up telephone links. Such high-speed connections allow users to download large files such as video clips or listen to online radio.

EASSy is one of the information and communications technology (ICT) projects of the continental development plan, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). In June, African telecommunications and technology ministers endorsed the immediate start of the project, which is expected to cost $300 mn and is due for completion in 2007. The project will significantly cut telecommunications costs within Africa and with countries overseas, thereby helping the continent to bridge the "digital divide" — the gulf between people and countries with access to knowledge and information and those without.

'African solidarity'

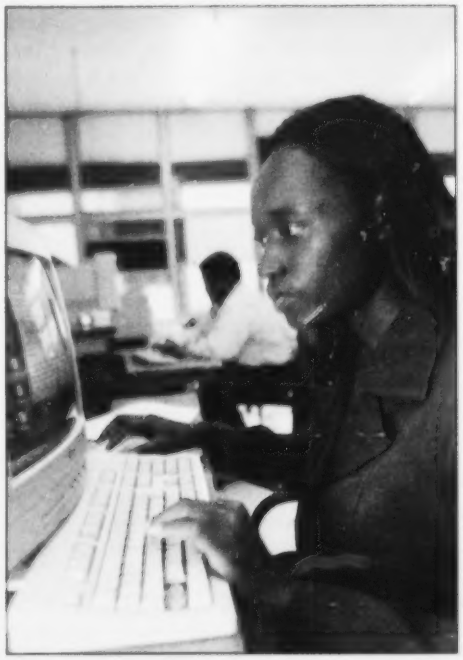
"We must commit ourselves to ensuring the successful implementation of the NEPAD broadband ICT infrastructure project," says South African Communication Minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri. The project, she says, offers responses to the continent's challenges "through African solidarity and partnership" and will "promote African self-sufficiency."

The EASSy project is part of an African plan to ensure that all countries are connected to each other through a broadband system. These countries will in turn be linked to the rest of the world through other submarine cables. Currently, the lack of adequate broadband connections has been a major hindrance to Africa's promotion of greater ICT use. There are few direct high-capacity Internet links between African countries. High-capacity transmission lines are mainly concentrated in the US, Europe and Asia.

As a result, about 75 per cent of Internet traffic in Africa first goes through Europe or the US and is then routed back, a very costly process. For example, while Benin and Burkina Faso are neighbours, Internet traffic between them passes through France or Canada. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada estimates that Africa spends $400 mn each year on the use of international bandwidth for national or regional data. In fact, in many cases, e-mails sent between two Internet service providers in the same country are sent abroad and then rerouted back because domestic "Internet exchange points" are lacking.

The slow pace of Internet development on the continent is reflected in low levels of use. Only 2.6 per cent of Africans have access to the Internet, compared with 10 per cent of Asians, 36 per cent of Europeans and 69 per cent of North Americans. When broken down by country, the level of Internet use in most of Africa is even lower, since two countries, Egypt and South Africa, account for nearly half of all users.

Low-speed transmission lines also mean that Internet users in Africa find it much faster and cheaper to download material rather than to post their own onto the Internet. This leaves Africans primarily as consumers instead of producers of Web content. To redress this imbalance, and in line with pledges to develop a more inclusive Internet that they made at last year's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunisia, African countries have initiated a series of ICT projects. In addition to EASSy, these include a venture by South Africa to involve the public in the development of its Internet domain ".za", attempts to translate software and other Web tools into African languages to allow more Africans to produce their own Web content, and numerous efforts to broaden the use of the Internet for distance learning.



Many Africans would like to use the Internet in their own languages.

A truly public Internet

In South Africa, the government recently launched a programme to make the Internet a truly public good by soliciting input from citizens on how they want the country's electronic communications system to operate. The move opens up to public discussion an area that has so far been the preserve of computer experts, and is part of a plan to establish rules to guide the

use of the country's Internet domain name ".za". Just as with any other medium, decisions have to be made about how to allocate, manage and regulate space.

A few years ago, the South African government appointed a local committee to run its Internet domain in the public interest. It had previously been operated by an individual who pioneered Internet development in the country. In order to be more inclusive, the committee will solicit input from South Africans, in ordinary language that people outside the Internet community can relate to, says Minister Matsepe-Casaburri, "so that even my granny can understand." The goal is to create policies that will make the Internet accessible to the majority, while reducing poverty and spreading information on health and development.

In its brief life, the Internet has evolved into an agent of revolutionary change in health, education, journalism, politics and other sectors. It is increasingly being used to transmit lifesaving medical information, coordinate relief for victims of natural disasters and provide uncensored information to people trapped under repressive governments.

The World Summit on the Information Society, which took place in two phases — in Switzerland in 2003 and in Tunisia last year — has given a new impetus to Africa's efforts to harness this tool, argues Prof. Olivier Nana Nzepa, an ICT lecturer at Cameroon's University of Yaounde. The key question, he says, is how to achieve the WSIS principles of "transparency, public accountability, public participation and equity," while simultaneously promoting much wider use of ICTs.

Language diversity

Another area of growing concern is the absence of African languages on the Internet. The dominance of European languages has limited the spread of Internet use by excluding those not fully literate in those languages. African information ministers meeting in Dakar, Senegal, last year urged new programmes to promote African and other languages on the Internet. This, they argued, would help "fight against the linguistic digital divide and ensure the participation of all in the emerging new society."

The original design of the Internet's domain name system had a strong technical bias towards English. Even languages such as French, Spanish and German are at a disadvantage when it comes to naming Internet hosts, because they use accented characters that the system does not support. In addition, existing tools to create Web pages, such as HTML (Hyper Text Mark-up Language), are based on English or other Western languages, requiring programmers to be functionally literate in those languages to generate content.

South African Communication Minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri: Her country's goal is to make the Internet accessible to the majority.

"Limiting people to the use of ICTs in a foreign language tends to exacerbate the digital divide, makes ICT adoption long, difficult and expensive, and impoverishes local cultures," notes a study by the Pan African Localization Project. Funded by Canada's IDRC and implemented by non-governmental African ICT and language development organizations Kabissa and Bisharat, the project seeks to "localize" software and Internet content by using Arabic and African languages.

The three-year project, launched in 2005, will survey the current state of localization in Africa, hold a training workshop for experts and develop a Web-based database of resources. "This is a timely and exciting project that has the potential to speed the evolution and increase the impact of information technology in Africa," says Mr. Don Osborn of Bisharat.

Creating local content and laying high-speed cables to carry it will make it easier to use the Internet as an effective tool for education. Governments generally acknowledge that building more classrooms and training more teachers to reach those currently outside the school system cannot by themselves lead to universal primary education by 2015, one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by UN member states in 2000.

"Providing connectivity through the use of the Internet and computers to schools and public centres is one of the priorities of governments," says Ms. Josephine Ouedraogo, acting deputy executive secretary at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), headquartered in Addis Ababa. "ICTs have already begun to exert massive transformation of education systems worldwide. The best teachers in the world are becoming available anywhere at the click of a mouse."

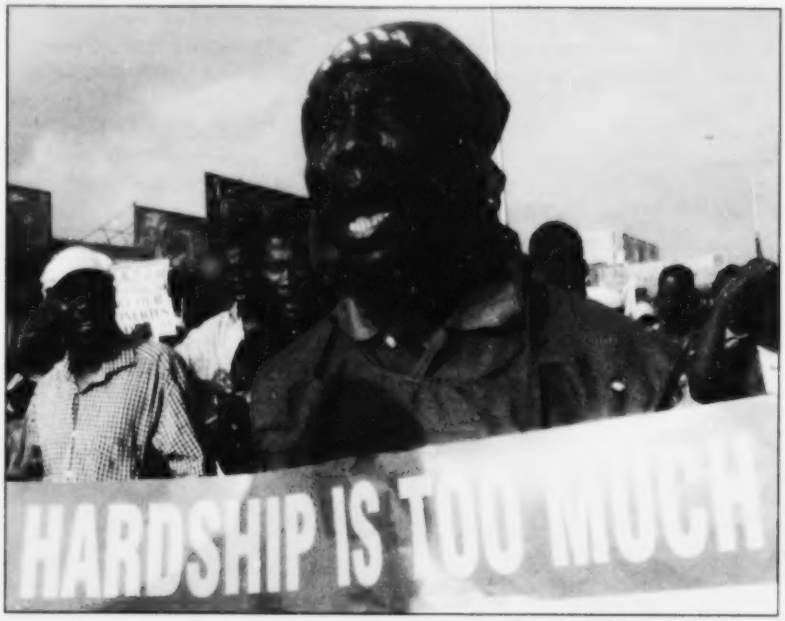
Ethiopia, one of Africa's poorest nations, has networked all of its 500 secondary schools and 12 universities. Established distance learning services in Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria and Tanzania are being augmented by ICT applications. And in many African countries multipurpose community telecentres are hooked up to the African Virtual University, an online college headquartered in Kenya, and schools are connected across national boundaries to other schools in 31 countries under a programme called SchoolNet Africa.

Beyond the need for greater financing for such efforts, the challenges of broadening Internet access "require a new commitment to work together if we are to realize the benefits of the information society," says International Telecommunication Union Secretary-General Yoshio Utsumi. "Seeing the fruits of today's powerful knowledge-based tools in the most impoverished economies will be the true test of an engaged, empowered and egalitarian information society." ■

Combating inequality in Africa

Lessen inequities to reduce poverty and reach MDGs, says UN

By **Ernest Harsch**



Nigerian labour protest. Workers across Africa are comparing their difficult conditions with the wealth of the elites.

Workers in Burkina Faso are angry. Four times in 2005 and then again this May, the country's trade unions shut down economic activity through a series of national general strikes. Thousands marched in the streets of that West African nation to protest low salaries, high prices, lost jobs and inadequate social benefits.

Very often, the strikers contrasted their living standards with those of the elites. At one march in Bobo-Dioulasso, the main commercial city, union leader Bakary Millogo decried the workers' "rampant pauperization" as opposed to the "scandalous and ostentatious" lifestyles of high government officials.

Burkina, commented a columnist for the independent daily *L'Observateur Paalga*, is "running the risk of a social explosion of unpredictable consequences." The dangers are all the greater, he added, because endemic poverty exists alongside visible signs of wealth. "Some take a plane to get treated for hay fever," he wrote, "while others die because they can't afford malaria treatment."

Father Balemans, an outspoken Catholic priest, affirmed that "the gap between the rich and the poor is widening ever more." Such a situation is all the more insupportable, he continued, in the midst of relatively high economic growth rates, which have been "mainly for the rich." The unions, in a joint declaration in April, affirmed: "The workers have a right to their share of the national wealth, which, according to the government, grew in 2005 by 7 per cent."

Elsewhere in Africa, similar trends are also arousing growing concern. Many Africans think that inequalities are widening, with a small slice of the population getting richer as the ranks of the poor keep growing.

In Dakar, a boom in housing construction in the Senegalese capital "has led to the emergence of a middle class," Ms. Fatimata Sy, director of a local social centre, recently told the Paris daily *Le Monde*. "Meanwhile, instability and poverty are gaining ground at the other end of the social ladder."

A series of public-opinion surveys conducted in 2002-03 in 15 African countries by African and US researchers found that a big majority of people believe conditions are worsening. When asked by the researchers of the AfroBarometer project, as it is known, whether their governments' economic policies were hurting most people and benefiting only a few, 61 per cent of the more than 23,000 people surveyed agreed. Only in three of the 15 countries (Lesotho, Mozambique and Namibia) did less than half the respondents think so.

'Social evils'

In the 1980s and 1990s, when the performance of African economies was stagnant or declining, economists at the main international financial institutions were able to easily blame the continent's widespread poverty on the lack of economic growth. Renewed growth, they argued, would eventually "trickle down" to improve everyone's well-being, including the poor. But with African growth rates picking up markedly over the past decade while the proportion of Africans living on less than US$1 per day continues to rise, such arguments are facing renewed scepticism.

Meanwhile, the international community's focus on achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — one of which is to cut in half by 2015 the percentage of people in the world with incomes below $1 a day — is drawing greater attention to the various factors that influence poverty trends.

"Inequality does matter for achievement of the MDGs," noted Mr. Arjan de Haan, a social development adviser with the UK's Department for International Development, in an article in *NEPAD Dialogue*, a publication of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a continental plan adopted by African leaders in 2001. "Inequality — particularly in assets and gender — can

even reduce rates of growth, hence indirectly limiting poverty reduction."

"Ignoring inequality in the pursuit of development is perilous," states UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs José Antonio Ocampo. "Focusing exclusively on economic growth and income generation as a development strategy is ineffective, as it leads to the accumulation of wealth by a few and deepens the poverty of the many." Besides impeding poverty reduction and achievement of the MDGs, Mr. Ocampo adds, failure to address inequalities means that "communities, countries and regions remain vulnerable to social, political and economic upheaval."

The World Bank, which for years emphasized market liberalization as the best route to economic growth and poverty reduction, now also recognizes the role that inequalities play in hindering those goals. "Equity considerations need to be brought squarely into the centre of both diagnosis and policy," says the Bank in the 2006 edition of its annual *World Development Report*, which this year focuses on the theme "Equity and Development."

Addressing the problems of inequality, such analysts argue, requires introducing policies that specifically target the gaps and ensure that the poorest segments of the population are able to overcome their disadvantages.

Combating inequities globally and within countries is an ethical and moral imperative, former South African president Nelson Mandela has argued. "Massive poverty and obscene inequality," he said in 2005, "are such terrible scourges of our times — times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation — that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils."

Gaping divides

In recent decades, African and Latin American countries have had the highest levels of inequality in income, according to a 2005 study by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), *The Inequality Predicament*. In both regions, "the situation deteriorated even further" in the 1980s and 1990s, said the report.

Such inequality meant that when economic downturn or disaster struck, those at the bottom of the income scale, the most vulnerable, were hurt disproportionately. And when national incomes rose, those at the top benefited the most, while the poor saw few gains, if any. Partly as a result, the number of people in sub-Saharan Africa living in absolute poverty (with incomes of less than $1 per day) doubled during those two decades, according to the DESA report. Their numbers climbed from 288 million in 1981 to 516 million in 2001 (see graph, page 19).

"Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times . . . that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils."

– Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa

While South Asia also saw a rise in the total number of poor in that period, the region's proportion of people living on less than $1 a day fell from 52 per cent to 31 per cent, marking progress towards the MDG target. But in sub-Saharan Africa, that share actually rose, from 42 per cent to 47 per cent.

Looking specifically at data on inequality, Mr. Branko Milanovic, a researcher at the World Bank, has detected some fluctuation. In the 1960s, he reports, the "Gini coefficient" — a common measure of income inequality — was on average 10 points higher in Africa than in the rest of the world combined. That difference diminished in the 1980s, but then in the 1990s "the gap opened up again."

In some countries, the gaps are very wide. In Zambia, for example, the richest 10 per cent of the population earns a total income that is 42 times larger than that of the poorest 10 per cent. In Cameroon, a child born into the poorest 20 per cent of families is more than twice as likely to die before the age of five as one born into the top 20 per cent.

Absolute poverty and inequality are different concepts, notes the UN Development Programme (UNDP), "but they are intimately related. Disparities in life chances define prospects for escaping poverty." Inequalities in access to healthcare, education or political rights, says the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2005*, all make it much harder for people to struggle out of poverty.

Among other elements contributing to inequality and poverty, notes the report, are two broad conditions that strongly affect people's incomes and access to social services. In most African countries, the urban-rural gap is especially wide. In Ghana, for example, the incidence of poverty in Accra, the capital, is only 2 per cent. But in the dry rural savannah regions in the north, it is 70 per cent. In Accra poverty has been declining, but in the savannah it has not budged.

Gender also is a prevalent factor (see box, page 18). Overall, women have access to fewer economic resources and have far less social and political power than do men, which greatly restricts their opportunities to climb out of poverty. In Guinea-Bissau, for instance, women have only about half the incomes of men and are only half as likely to be able to read or write.

Health and education disparities

Economic inequalities are only part of the picture. Across Africa, health, education, social welfare and many other aspects of human well-being are also marked by wide disparities. The wealthy receive the best schooling and medical care, while many of the poor simply do without. The poor education and health of those living in poverty in turn make it harder for them or their children to advance their economic position.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the market liberalization policies pushed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other donor institutions led to drastic cuts in government-backed social programmes, notes the DESA report. That in turn "exacerbated inequalities."

By the end of the 1990s, the disastrous impact of such cuts had become so glaring that policies shifted again, towards increasing social spending. While many argue that health and education spending in Africa is still far below what it should be, others point out that allocating more money alone will not solve all the problems. In Africa, notes Yvonne Tsikata, a scholar at the Economic and

Redistributing assets to women

In Africa – indeed, across all societies – gender is one of the most common markers of inequality. Women, who generally have less political and social power than men, usually also have much lower incomes and far less access to productive resources and opportunities. "Nowhere," notes the UN Development Programme's *Human Development Report 2005*, "are power inequalities and their consequences more clearly displayed than for women."

Examples are numerous, across virtually all areas of activity. According to World Bank statistics, drawn from detailed household survey data, females have less than half the average number of years of education than do males in Benin, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Guinea, Niger, Senegal, South Africa and Togo. In Chad, women on average complete less than a quarter of the schooling that men do.

Overall gender inequalities affect women's health and also the nutrition and health of their children. The Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute calculates that if gender equity were achieved in sub-Saharan Africa, child malnutrition would fall by 3 per cent, with 1.7 million fewer malnourished children.

Social and economic inequalities also cut across gender lines, including in health indicators. In Togo, for instance, 91 per cent of women from the richest fifth of the population are attended by skilled health personnel during childbirth. Among women from the poorest fifth, that share drops to 25 per cent. In Mauritania, that gap is even wider, at 93 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively.

Among countries with low levels of human development, women often earn less than half of what men earn, including in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone. In a handful of countries, such as Kenya, women's earnings lag only slightly behind those of men.

Women have far less access to land and other productive assets. In Cameroon, women do more than three-quarters of agricultural work, but hold less than 10 per cent of all land titles. In Ghana, because women lack the social status to hold onto land during fallowing periods, they tend not to let the land rest, thus worsening soil degradation.

In addition to tackling inequalities in education, health and other areas, the World Bank, in this year's *World Development Report*, urges not only "redistributing assets" in favour of women, but also "redistributing access to capital, perhaps by promoting microcredit, strengthening women's land rights or access to jobs and welfare programmes, designing affirmative action programmes to break down stereotyping and improving access to justice systems."

While better government policies are essential, women across Africa have also demonstrated a strong commitment to organizing themselves to advance their positions. In the poor neighbourhood of Grand Yoff, in Senegal's capital, Dakar, 53 women formed an economic association two years ago. They each put in CFA3,000 (about US$5.50) per month to buy tea in bulk, which they then repackaged and sold as individual tea bags. Now that the association has been able to accumulate some capital, it is in a position to make five-month loans of CFA 25,000 to ten women at a time, to help them expand and diversify their economic activities.

Social Research Foundation in Tanzania, "social sector spending is poorly targeted and often regressive. The poor are therefore benefiting much less than the level of social expenditures would suggest."

In Guinea, according to a study by Florencia Castro-Leal and other World Bank researchers, 48 per cent of all people visiting hospitals and primary health facilities come from the richest fifth of the population. Those from the poorest fifth make up only 4 per cent of patients.

"Education," notes the DESA report, "is typically seen as a means of narrowing inequalities." However, across sub-Saharan Africa, 37 per cent of children did not go to primary school in 2001, the highest rate for any world region. Among females, the share was 41 per cent. Almost all children out of school are from poor families.

Over the past decade, African governments and donor institutions have been making a concerted push to significantly increase primary school enrolment rates, with some success. This is an important first step. But Ms. Tsikata, citing a study on Ghana, notes that increased primary schooling for the poor does very little to improve their immediate chances of escaping poverty. Most of the economic benefits of education do not kick in until students have reached at least a middle-school level.

Poverty amidst growth

For years, mainstream economists and development planners argued that the most important task facing African societies was to achieve macroeconomic stability, liberalize their economies and promote market-based policies that would stimulate economic growth. With growth, they maintained, there would be more resources for everyone, making it easier to reduce poverty. "A rising sea lifts all boats" was a favourite metaphor. But that view ignored how inequality seriously skews the distribution of resources. It therefore could not convincingly explain increases in poverty in the midst of growth.

Burkina, for example, has had an average annual growth rate over the past decade of around 5.6 per cent, one of the stronger and most sustained performances in Africa. But comprehensive household consumption surveys conducted in 1994, 1998 and 2003 detected a steady increase in the poverty rate. According to the country's current Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which drew on those surveys, the share of Burkinabè living below the poverty line rose from 44.5 per cent to 46.4 per cent during that period, with the sharpest increases in the cities and towns, which were hit hardest by job losses and high prices.

However, an assessment of Burkina's PRSP by the staff of the IMF and World Bank maintained that the government's figures showing an increase in poverty were "inconsistent" with the country's growth rates. Believing that the problem lay in the numbers, the IMF-World Bank staff recalculated the poverty estimates for 1998 so that they were significantly higher — and therefore the most recent figure in 2003 appeared to reflect a relative decline.

Whatever the official statistics show, most Burkinabè believe strongly that poverty has been rising. A public opinion survey of 1,200 people across all social categories in August 2005 found that 86.5 per cent judged poverty to have worsened since 1998.

Inequality can be a major factor in poverty trends, admits the World Bank. Looking at all developing countries, the Bank finds that in low-income countries generally, each percentage point of growth brings a 4 per cent decline in the number of people living on less than $1 a day. However, it adds, that reduction is almost nonexistent in countries with high levels of income inequality.

Inequality may prevent the benefits of growth from reaching many of the poor, but the relationship also works in another direction, many experts say. "Extreme inequality is not just bad for poverty reduction — it is also bad for growth," argues the UNDP report. "Poor people remain poor partly because they cannot borrow against future earnings to invest in production, the education of their children and assets to reduce their vulnerability. Insecure land rights and limited access to justice can create further barriers to investment. Deprived of public goods — such as information and legal rights — poor people are denied opportunities to contribute to growth."

Kibera slum in Uganda. Kenya. Policies should aim to give resources to the poor.

Inequalities in power

Inequality and politics also interact, often in negative ways. "Inequalities in income and human capabilities often reflect inequalities in political power," observes the UNDP report. Poor people, women, rural populations and marginalized ethnic groups are disadvantaged in part because they usually are badly organized, have a weak political voice and in many countries are excluded from major areas of decision-making — especially those involving the distribution of economic and social resources. Unequal political power, adds the World Bank, "leads to the formation of institutions that perpetuate inequalities in power, status and wealth."

Apartheid South Africa was a prime example. That country's white supremacist political system denied the most basic rights to the African majority, who were disenfranchised, uprooted from their lands and confined to menial, low-paying jobs. Until the apartheid system was dismantled in the 1990s, race and income levels overlapped almost completely. The country is still struggling to overcome that legacy.

Mr. Milanovic, in his study of inequality in Africa, finds that ethnic divisions elsewhere in Africa also tend to reinforce economic and social inequalities to some extent. Ethnic "fragmentation," he says, can contribute to inequality "by leading to a political fight over the spoils between the different ethnic groups." Those groups with greater political power have an advantage over their competitors.

Inequality, in turn, can help fuel political instability. According to data compiled by the UN University, based on comprehensive household surveys in 25 African countries, Sierra Leone had the highest level of inequality in 1989, just before the outbreak of its decade-long civil war. The richest 20 per cent of the population accounted for more than 63 per cent of all expenditures, while the bottom 40 per cent had the resources to spend just a meagre 3.1 per cent.

After that war ended, surveys of former combatants found that many young people in Sierra Leone felt a sense of hopelessness, worsened by visible signs of elite wealth and power, that had contributed to their decision to take up arms.

Bringing back the state

Where extreme inequalities exist, markets, by themselves, do not lessen the gaps, argues the DESA report. The poorest and most marginalized lack the resources or political voice to influence the distribution of goods and services. Markets most benefit those with the greatest wealth and power. Therefore, the main means for overcoming inequity lie with state institutions that operate in the interests of the general public.

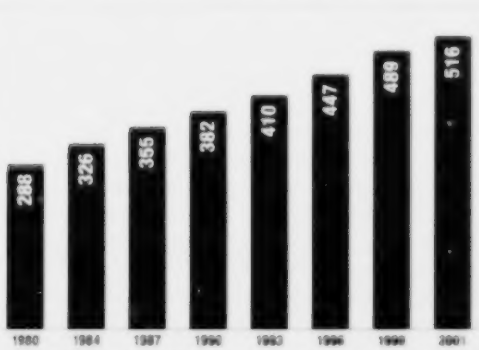
"The essential importance of the state transcends the logic of market forces," says the report, "particularly in areas such as ethics, equality, social justice and the defence of rights intrinsic to citizenship, which are foreign to market mechanisms and institutions.

"The state is also more effective in addressing risk, vulnerability, social exclusion, destitution and many other issues not amenable to microeconomic calculus."

Many development experts now concur with the UN's DESA that it

Rising poverty in sub-Saharan Africa

Millions of people living on less than $1 per day



Source: *Ilo Africa Renewal*, from data in UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The Inequality Predicament, 2005

is vital to end "the folly of privatizing state functions on a large scale" and to rebuild the public institutions and services that were weakened or dismantled in recent decades.

Getty Images - AFP / Marcelo Lorigal

Many of Africa's poor are finding that the benefits of economic growth do not "trickle down" to them

A big majority of Africans seem to agree. The surveys by the AfroBarometer project found that even though most Africans prefer a mixed economy, "their vision favours state intervention above market forces." Across the 15 countries surveyed, an average of 70 per cent opposed reducing the size of the public sector.

Some officials still object that governments do not deliver services very effectively, citing their poor performance in the 1970s and early 1980s, when public sectors dominated. But while corruption, cronyism and mismanagement continue to plague many state institutions across Africa, the continent's shift towards multiparty electoral systems and the proliferation of programmes to strengthen good governance have improved the accountability and capacity of those institutions.

Shifting policies

Among the tasks that public institutions can perform to help lessen inequality and realize "the progressively redistributive dimensions of development," as DESA put it, are ensuring that all sectors of the population are socially and politically integrated, that roads and other infrastructure are extended to geographically remote areas and that economic policies emphasize activities that stimulate the creation of jobs.

National tax systems also should be made "moderately progressive," adds the World Bank, so that the rich — many of whom now evade taxes — pay more, thus generating additional funds for poverty reduction and basic social services.

According to the study by Ms. Castro-Leal and her colleagues, a greater portion of spending within the health sector should shift from services that mainly benefit the wealthy to those used mostly by the poor. In Ghana, for example, two-thirds of all health expenditures now go to hospitals, located largely in the main towns, while poor Ghanaians generally go only to primary health clinics. And, the researchers add, since the poor often cannot afford to pay "user fees" in the clinics, such charges should only be applied to the better-off.

UNDP notes that when Uganda eliminated user fees at health facilities in 2001, public visits increased by 80 per cent, with half of the increase from the poorest fifth of the population.

Selective government subsidies can help ensure that the poor have access to other services as well. In the late 1990s, when Senegal first permitted private participation in urban water distribution, it accompanied those reforms with subsidies to provide standpipe connections in poor neighbourhoods.

In earlier decades, such government subsidies often were not targeted very well. Corrupt bureaucrats or those with high-level political connections were frequently able to divert the resources or benefits away from the intended recipients. With that experience in mind, the DESA report cautioned that targeting should be "community-based," with local communities directly involved in identifying beneficiaries. Experiences with such an approach in some Latin American countries have demonstrated that community-based targeting not only promotes greater equality, but also strengthens local capacities more generally.

Some African countries have shown that it is possible to stimulate economic growth while at the same time reducing inequality and poverty. Mauritius is a frequent example. It has had a stable democratic system for decades, with relatively smooth changes in government and a balanced distribution of political power. The authorities took into account the interests of the country's well-organized labour movement, while economic policies encouraged a diversification from sugar production into manufacturing. The government resisted external pressures in the 1980s to drastically cut public spending and maintained relatively large budget allocations for health, education, water, sanitation and housing assistance, drawing on taxes levied on sugar exporters.

"Poverty fell significantly" in Mauritius, notes Ms. Tsikata. "After an initial rise, inequality has fallen and social indicators have improved; they are now well above the average for Africa and indeed for middle-income countries." According to World Bank estimates, Mauritius now has the lowest level of inequality among 30 sub-Saharan countries for which data is available.

In a recent essay on globalization and social justice, Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize laureate in economics, notes that much of the debate internationally has focused on whether inequalities are growing between the richer and poorer countries. He believes that they are and that those gaps must be addressed. But he also argues that in many poor countries local factors may have an even greater impact on poverty levels. "With good local policies — in education, health, property reform and access to credit, including microcredit for the least well-off — the entire economic system will improve." ■

Protecting civilians

from page 5

to better protect civilians are now common in peacekeeping and relief operations. They include:

- Greater use of international civilian police to help local forces keep peace
- More experts to monitor humanitarian norms, human rights and criminal law by combatants
- More systematic disarmament and demobilization of ex-combatants
- The placement of refugee camps far from borders and war zones to better protect the refugees.

Perhaps most significantly, the mandates of UN peacekeeping operations have often been strengthened to allow peacekeepers to stop attacks on civilians and to militarily engage combatants. In Rwanda, the UN mission was permitted to shoot only in self-defence. Today UN peacekeepers in the DRC routinely confront armed groups in order to protect civilians.

The UN also frequently supports regional or country-led forces that are able to respond quickly to massacres. Troops from the Economic Community of West African States helped stabilize Sierra Leone and Liberia before strong UN peacekeeping missions could be put into the field. French troops played an important role in both Côte d'Ivoire and the eastern DRC and South African troops led an African Union mission in Burundi.

The prosecution of war criminals and those responsible for genocide is another tool. According to Mr. Mendez, impunity "breeds insecurity among populations at risk and creates an incentive for repetition among the offenders."

The international tribunals for Rwanda, Bosnia and Sierra Leone set up to prosecute the crimes committed in those countries will hopefully send the message that those who attack and kill civilians will no longer get away free. The International Criminal Court in The Hague is currently investigating rebels, militia forces and military commanders in the DRC, northern Uganda and Sudan who are suspected of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Ultimately, Mr. Mendez points out, the best way to protect civilians is to head off atrocities before they can escalate into genocide. "We need to think about prevention in means other than military intervention." Massive human rights abuses, crimes against humanity and war crimes also elicit "a moral obligation to act," he says. "We need to talk about early warning and early action in ways that can help prevent genocide without waiting until the last minute, when the only thing that will prevent genocide is military action – and when, as in Rwanda, we will be told it is too late." ■

African AIDS battle

from page 3

UNAIDS, the prevalence rate has been falling in Burkina Faso's urban areas overall, as it has in Ethiopia and Rwanda and in the capital of Burundi.

The UN Secretary-General, in his report, noted that there also has been progress in anti-AIDS efforts globally. Between 2001 and 2005, Mr. Annan reported, total financing for HIV programmes in developing countries increased more than fourfold. The number of people on antiretroviral therapy rose fivefold, with a similar increase in the numbers of people seeking to test their HIV status.

UN Photo/Evan Schneider

"A new global response to the AIDS epidemic must build on what we have done and learned."

—Nkhensani Mavasa, South African AIDS activist

No time to relax

"Yet the epidemic continues to outpace the global response," Mr. Annan added. The year 2005 brought more new infections than ever before. Another 2.8 million people died of AIDS, some 2 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. Piot cautioned that the slowing in the rise in overall infection rates does not yet mark a turning point. "The actual number of people infected continues to rise because of population growth," he pointed out, while in most countries of Southern African — the epicentre of the disease — very high prevalence rates are continuing to edge upwards.

At a special summit of the African Union on 2–4 May in Nigeria, African leaders recommitted themselves to fight against the epidemic, which remains "a state of emergency in our continent." Given Africa's own limited resources, they called on the international community to provide greater financial and technical assistance. But the African heads of state also vowed to "intensify our practical leadership role" by mobilizing local resources, strengthening African health systems, combating stigma and gender discrimination, expanding access to antiretroviral therapies and investing heavily in prevention measures. Prevention programmes, they said, should focus especially on young people, women, girls and other vulnerable groups and aim towards ensuring "universal access to male and female condoms for all sexually active persons."

Ms. Mavasa, the South African AIDS activist, agreed with the UN and the African Union that "a new global response to the AIDS epidemic must build on what we have done and learned." Success, she stressed, can only be achieved with "100 per cent of truth, leadership, accountability and universal access to prevention, care, treatment and support." ■

Cassava

from page 13

pocket. I can buy seeds to grow cabbages and tomatoes to feed my family. With support, many more women can become independent."

In this campaign for cassava growing, experts from NEPAD and FAO are helping to spread IITA's improved plants to more than a dozen countries. Although cassava is not a silver bullet and it will not be able to remedy all of Africa's food shortages, given the means, cassava farmers will be able to produce food for hungry people across Africa. ■

A F R I C A

AGENDA

26-28 July 2006, Budapest (Hungary) and 2-4 August 2006, Baltimore (USA) — International e-Participation and Local Democracy Symposium.

29-30 July 2006, Owerri (Nigeria) — 2nd International Conference of the Trans Atlantic Research Group.

13-18 August 2006, Toronto (Canada) — XVI International AIDS Conference.

16-25 August 2006, Florence (Italy) — IX World Renewable Energy Congress.

29-31 August 2006, Gauteng (South Africa) — Combating and Preventing Terrorism in Africa.

31 August - 2 September 2006, Oslo (Norway) — The Oslo Conference on Private Public Partnership for an African Green Revolution.

10-15 September 2006, Utrecht (Netherlands) — Tourism Africa 2006.

11-13 September 2006, London (UK) — African Studies Association Biennial Conference. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

25-27 October 2006, Rome (Italy) — First World Congress on Communication for Development.

26-28 October 2006, Boston, MA (USA) — International Conference on the State of Affairs of Africa.

WHAT HAS TAKEN PLACE

6-7 June 2006, Washington, DC (USA) — 2006 Small Arms Forum.

26 June - 7 July 2006, United Nations, New York (USA) — Small Arms Review Conference.

1-7 July 2006, Banjul (Gambia) — 7th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of African Union Heads of state and Government.

10-11 July 2006, Rabat (Morocco) — Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development.

A F R I C A

BOOKS

AIDS and Power: Why There Is No Political Crisis — Yet

The Africa AIDS Pandemic: A History

The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good

Africa in the United Nations System, 1945-2005

Afrique, le retour... et marche!

La fracture agricole et alimentaire mondiale

Attacking Africa's Poverty: Experience from the Ground

Aux Etats-Unis d'Afrique

L'Afrique doit se refaire confiante: L'engagement et réflexion sur 4 décennies de développement

The Current Negotiations in the WTO: Options, Opportunities and Risks for Developing Countries

Darfur: A Short History of a Long War

The Origins of Development Economics: How Schools of Economic Thought Have Addressed Development

Ethique et développement durable

Everyday Corruption and the State: Citizens and Public Officials in Africa

Africa Unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future

Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences

Géopolitique du Congo (RDC)

No Refuge: The Crisis of Refugee Militarization in Africa

Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940

L'information stratégique agricole en Afrique: Cerbere de la vulgarisation

Ismaïly Joshua Gologo: L'apprentissage de l'Afrique

Liberal Democracy and its Critics in Africa: Political Dysfunction and the Struggle for Social Progress

Agriculture Biotechnology, Neocolonial Western Narratives and African Abductions

Feeding Africa: The Economics of Famine

Rural Exit: Oil, Development, Poverty, Reconstruction and Unrest

The Economics of Corruption in Liberia

AFRICA IN BRIEF

African border dispute resolved peacefully

Poor countries promote good governance

'Grounds for optimism' on African economic growth

AFRICA WATCH

URBANIZATION

The battle in Africa's slums

The number of Africans living in impoverished urban slums is growing at a faster rate in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world. According to the *State of the World's Cities 2006/7*, released in June by the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), African slums are growing by 4.5 per cent a year, about twice the growth rates in southern and eastern Asia and nearly four times faster than in Latin America. During the past 15 years, sub-Saharan Africa's total slum population has doubled, from 101 million in 1990 to 199 million in 2005.

UN-Habitat also finds that slums in sub-Saharan Africa are the most deprived in the world, in terms of housing conditions, access to sanitation and clean water and other indicators.

Reversing such trends will require significantly more investments, better urban management and the empowerment of city dwellers to improve their own conditions, argues the report. With a growing proportion of the population in Africa and the rest of the world living in cities, upgrading slum areas will be a major front in the struggle to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), notes Ms. Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, UN under-secretary-general and executive director of UN-Habitat. "The battle for the MDGs," she argues, "will be won or lost in the slums." ■

HIPC

Debt relief falls short

An internal auditing unit of the World Bank reports that many of the countries that have benefited from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative have seen their debts climb back to where they were before receiving assistance under the plan. The report, prepared by the Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG), says HIPC cut the ratios of debt servicing to export earnings in half for 18 countries. But in eight, all of them African, the ratios now once again exceed the "sustainability" thresholds set under the plan. Creditors have committed about $50 bn to some 30 countries since HIPC was launched in 1996 by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as a way to handle the debt crisis of the world's poorest countries.

"Debt reduction alone is not a sufficient instrument to affect debt sustainability, which also requires improvements in repayment capacity," the report notes. Among the reasons countries are slipping back is that they have not diversified their exports, which would have increased revenues and enabled them to meet tough new borrowing terms, the report notes.

For lasting results, the international community will need to release more resources for targeted poverty-reduction programmes, the IEG says. In turn, recipient governments should adopt "sound" policies. "Debt relief by itself doesn't ensure that the country will get on a sustainable path," said Ms. Victoria Elliott, an IEG manager. ■

ENVIRONMENT

African forests dwindling

Africa is losing its forests at a rate higher than any other region except South America, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports. The FAO informed a recent meeting in Maputo, Mozambique, of the organization's African Forestry and Wildlife Commission that the continent's forest cover fell from 655.6 mn hectares to 635.4 mn hectares between 2000 and 2005. This marked a net loss of more than 4 mn hectares per year, largely through the conversion of forest lands to agriculture.

"The continent leads the world in forest fires, mainly due to the traditional practice of using fire for conversion of forest to agriculture or grassland," the agency said. During the last 15 years, more than half of African countries enacted new laws to manage their forests and two thirds now have active national management programmes. But in many countries implementation remains weak because of inadequate financing. ■

APPOINTMENTS

UN / Evan Schneider

Mr. **Legwaila Joseph Legwaila** *of Botswana has been named by the UN Secretary-General as UN under-secretary-general and special adviser on Africa, replacing Mr. Ibrahim Gambari. Before taking up his new post in May, Mr. Legwaila was the Secretary-General's special representative for the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea. A former ambassador of Botswana to the UN and other countries, he also served as special representative of the Secretary-General of the former Organization of African Unity (OAU) and special envoy of the Chairman of the Frontline States. During Namibia's transition to independence in 1989-90, he served as the UN Secretary-General's deputy special representative there.*

UN / Eskinder Debebe

Ms. **Haya Rashed Al Khalifa** *of Bahrain has been elected by the UN General Assembly as the president of the 61st session scheduled to begin on 12 September. She would become only the third female president of the Assembly. As part of a long and distinguished career, Ms. Khalifa was one of the first two women lawyers to practice law in Bahrain. She has also served as Bahrain's ambassador to France and permanent delegate to UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from 2000 to 2004. She is currently legal advisor to the Royal Court of the Kingdom of Bahrain.*

UN / Mark Garten

Former chairperson of the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission, Ms. **Radhika Coomaraswamy** *has been appointed as the UN Secretary-General's new special representative for Children and Armed Conflict. As an internationally known human rights advocate, Ms. Coomaraswamy served as special rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Commission on violence against women (1994-2003) and director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka.*

UN / Eskinder Debebe

The UN Secretary-General has appointed Ms. **Carolyn McAskie** *of Canada as assistant secretary-general for Peacebuilding Support. She previously served as special representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Peacekeeping Operation in Burundi, assistant secretary-general for Humanitarian Affairs and deputy emergency relief coordinator at the UN Secretariat in New York.*